

Review: The House of Lords in the Age of George III (1760-1811) by Michael W. McCahill. Pp. 475. ISBN: 9781405192255; Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

Michael McCahill is an established expert on the House of Lords and this monumental tome is the product of four decades' work in this field. It has been published in a book series linked to the journal *Parliamentary History*, to which the author has been a regular contributor. It is not to be confused with a publication from the History of Parliament Trust, which its layout and approach most resembles (and whose survey volumes have in the past appeared as standalone paperbacks like this). Indeed, given that the latter is not due to publish its volumes on the Lords until later this decade, the appearance of McCahill's volume is especially welcome. And given that this is the product of one scholar's labours rather than that of a full-time project team, its achievement is doubly impressive.

McCahill seeks to rehabilitate the reputation of the late-Georgian House of Lords. He rejects whiggish accounts that take contemporary allegations of its parasitism, obstructionism and anachronism at face value. Nor does he have much time for revisionists who attribute its continuing relevance to its adoption of the middle-class standards of politeness, professionalism and patriotism. Linda Colley's case for the latter gets short shrift. Although there are nods to 'four nation's history' throughout this book, there is little role here for the currently fashionable explanations of eighteenth-century cultural studies. Apart from an excellent chapter on 'Public Opinion and Public Pressure, 1784-1811', there is little sense of a public sphere beyond the House and the country seats of its members. Instead, McCahill draws our attention to the mechanics and leadership of the institution, and the interests, expertise and connections of its members in order to suggest that the Lords was an efficient and conscientious institution that was appropriate for its task and its times.

The membership of the Lords was by no means monolithic or passive. Anything up to a quarter of its members would have identified with the political opposition, and big votes could be mustered against the government on single issues, such as the controversial Cider Bill of 1763 that united agricultural interests with opponents of Bute, contributing to the fall of his administration. Other interest groups that could form powerful voting blocs included the Bishops, military interests, moral reformers and pro- and anti-slavery factions. McCahill also places the members of the Lords firmly in the wider social context of the aristocracy, taking into account their business dealings, pastimes and marital alliances. The status of Lords as local power magnates emerges in their involvement in electoral interests. The practice of using their patronage to get

MPs elected was a key radical complaint against the upper house. Tellingly, McCahill is untroubled by this: the fact that Lords could influence the Commons via their clients

'contributed to the relatively efficient and generally harmonious functioning of the unreformed parliament' (p. 316).

In its focus on the structures and personnel of high politics, its rejection of teleology and its scrupulously empirical approach, *The House of Lords in the Age of George I II* is therefore in the best tradition of 'tory' history. For McCahill, the devil is in the detail, and there is plenty of that in its 475 pages of dense type, with copious footnotes and appendices. The nature of its topic and its subdivided structure mean that most of its readers will likely approach this as a reference volume rather than as a cover-to-cover read. In this regard, the extensive index is particularly helpful, although it is more comprehensive for names than topics. To take the example of the present reviewer's preoccupation, the militia is only listed under 'bills and acts', whereas there are at least a dozen fascinating references to the institution elsewhere in the text: McCahill makes many excellent points about the involvement of this class of men in county administration and local defence. In general, although the approach may seem old-fashioned, McCahill has many new things to say. Whether the Lords' critics in the eighteenth or twenty-first centuries would like it or not, the picture that emerges from this book is of an institution at the centre of Georgian political life.